

FACT SHEET

Can I Deliver Mental Health / Counselling Services with an Interpreter?

Though there has been little research in terms of quality of service provision and outcomes in relation to mental health services, there is little doubt that inadequate communication with people of limited English/French proficiency (LEP) imposes serious barriers to accessing quality services. There is evidence to suggest that when language supports are available, LEP clients seek services (McGlynn, Crosscurrents, Summer, 2004). Service providers report ongoing problems with lack of language and cultural interpretation services, which are critical in dealing with sensitive mental health issues. If communication between a clinician and a patient is inadequate, it can result in the underestimation or overestimation of the severity of psychopathology, the failure to recognize psychopathology, and the diagnosis of psychopathology which is not present (Minas et. al., 2001).

Ontario Language Interpretation Service (OLIS) and not-for-profit agencies offering interpretation services in the mental health sector strongly agree that interpreting for mental health services is not only possible but must also be made available. They state that since interpretation is best done verbatim, faithful interpretation best serves the needs of a client seeking mental health services. It is the interpreter's job to inform the service provider exactly what was said by a client. It is the service provider's job to ask for clarification and the interpreter's job to ask the questions and to relay the message.

These agencies also recognize that interpreting for mental health services can be taxing on interpreters and measures must be taken to ensure physical safety of all parties involved. Therefore, debriefing is extremely critical and interpreters must be properly trained to effectively debrief. Generally, there is consensus that interpreters working in mental health must be properly trained. In addition to standard interpreter training and proof of language competency tests (CILISAT/ILISAT), it is desirable that interpreters working in mental health are familiar with basic psychiatric terms and concepts, have an understanding of stigma associated with mental health issues, have an understanding of mental illness and have considered their own attitudes to and assumptions about people with mental health illness. Many suggested that all standard interpreter training curriculum include a special piece on mental health interpreting with face-to-face and on-site interactions with representatives from the mental health services.

Mental health service providers across Canada have developed diverse strategies in response to language barriers and to promote the delivery of quality services to people with LEP. For example, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) has the Cultural Interpretation Service (CIS) which offers interpretation and translation services in 55 languages and dialects. Cultural Interpretation Services (CIS) gives clients at the CAMH access to trained, professional interpreters, free of charge. This service aims to improve communication between clients and service providers, improve access to treatment and increase the quality of care for clients whose preferred language is not English.

